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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12018>

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### Citation

CROMHEECKE, Saartje; VAN HOYE, Greet; and LIEVENS, Filip. Changing things up in recruitment: Effects of a 'strange' recruitment medium on applicant pool quantity and quality. (2013). *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. 86, (3), 410-416. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business.  
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Changing things up in recruitment: Effects of a ‘strange’ recruitment medium on applicant pool quantity and quality<sup>1</sup>

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Published in Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, September 2013, 86 (3), 410-416

<https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12018>

Submitted version

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## Abstract

In a field experiment, we investigated the impact of a ‘strange’ recruitment medium on the quantity and quality of the applicant pool. Recruiting through an unusual medium (i.e., postcard) was associated with higher applicant pool quantity, as compared to a more frequently used medium (i.e., e-mail). With respect to quality, applicants recruited through the strange medium were higher educated. A follow-up questionnaire confirmed that the media were perceived to differ in strangeness, not in media richness or credibility. These results suggest that ‘changing things up’ in recruitment by employing strange recruitment media can positively affect key recruitment outcomes.

## Practitioner points

Employing ‘strange’ recruitment media can enhance the effectiveness of recruitment (i.e., applicant quantity and quality).

‘Changing things up’ in recruitment may help organizations to differentiate themselves from competitors.

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper was presented at the 27th Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, San Diego, CA (April, 2012).

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## Background

Nowadays, organizations must stand out from their competitors to become an employer of choice, making recruitment one of the most crucial human resource functions for organizational success (Breaugh, 2013). Cable (2007) recommends that organizations ask the right questions about what makes them distinct from competing organizations and create a 'special sauce' that is hard for competitors to imitate yet loved by consumers and employees. To this end, 'strange' recruitment activities can be a valuable asset for organizations to attract potential applicants' attention and stay competitive in the labour market. Strange is defined as 'out of the ordinary; unusual or striking; differing from the normal' (Cable, 2007, p. 1).

So far, recruitment research has paid little attention as to how organizations can differentiate themselves in terms of recruitment activities (Breaugh, 2013). As one exception, Barber and Roehling (1993) found that unusual information in job advertisements received more attention than more common information. Their study focused on the effect of a strange recruitment *message*, whereas little is known about the impact of a strange recruitment *medium* on key recruitment outcomes.

Therefore, we conducted a field experiment comparing the effect of a strange recruitment medium on organizational attraction to a more common medium. Importantly, actual measures of applicant pool quantity and quality were assessed. To verify whether our findings could be attributed to the medium's strangeness, a follow-up study was conducted, measuring potential applicants' perceptions of both recruitment media.

## Strange recruitment medium

Consistent with Cable (2007), we define a strange recruitment medium as an unusual and original way to recruit potential applicants that is clearly different from how most companies are communicating job vacancies. The social cognition literature offers theoretical evidence explaining why a strange recruitment medium may be a good way to improve applicant attraction. Specifically, social cognition research indicates that people use scripts that describe the sequences of expected events in a given situation (e.g., recruitment). These scripts determine not only the sequences of behaviour, but also the attention people devote to events. Information relevant for the situation but inconsistent with the script pops out and receives more attention (Smith & Collins, 2009).

Recruiting in a strange and unusual way is likely to be inconsistent with potential applicants' recruitment scripts. This violation of existing scripts may make certain stimuli (e.g., recruitment media) more salient than others (Corbetta & Shulman, 2002). Therefore, strange recruitment media are expected to attract more attention from potential applicants, resulting in a higher number of people willing to apply for a job (i.e., applicant pool quantity).

*H1: A strange recruitment medium will be associated with higher applicant pool quantity than a more common medium.*

Moreover, we expect the use of a strange recruitment medium to also affect applicant pool quality (i.e., applicants' characteristics such as education and work experience). Specifically, the population of high-quality applicants is characterized by high levels of employment (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012). As such, these much-sought-after candidates are typically not actively looking for new job opportunities (i.e., passive job seekers), and job openings distributed through common recruitment media will be hardly noticed (Breaugh, 2013). Hence, organizations might benefit from using strange recruitment media to attract the attention of these passive high-quality job applicants and as such promote their initial decisions to apply (Jones, Shultz, & Chapman, 2006). Therefore, we expect that more high-quality applicants will apply when strange media are used.

*H2: A strange recruitment medium will be associated with higher applicant pool quality than a more common medium.*

## **Method**

### **Field experiment**

In this field experiment, we collaborated with the Belgian division of a well-established technology firm that struggled to recruit qualified engineers. As almost each organization recruiting engineers uses the same media, this organization sought a 'strange' way to attract potential applicants' attention. Therefore, in the first condition, we used a strange recruitment medium that differed from the usual way in which engineers are recruited. Specifically, a seemingly handwritten picture postcard was sent to potential applicants' home address. In the second condition, an e-mail was sent to potential applicants. Nowadays, almost all organizations are using the Internet for recruiting applicants. Therefore, recruiting through e-mail can be considered as an often used and unsurprising medium. Given that we wanted to examine the effect of the recruitment medium, the job vacancy's content and layout were kept constant across the two conditions.

To verify whether the postcard represented a 'strange' recruitment medium, an online pilot survey asked 55 Belgian engineers (94.5% male; mean age = 36.7 years,  $SD = 9.2$ ) to indicate the frequency of receiving job vacancies through various media in the past 6 months, using a 5-point rating scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *very frequently*, Blau, 1994). As expected, a postcard ( $M = 1.07$ ;  $SD = 0.26$ ) was a significantly less frequently used medium for recruiting Belgian engineers than an e-mail ( $M = 3.09$ ;  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(54) = -14.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -3.83$ .

### **Sample and procedure**

Our data were collected during an actual recruitment process. A Belgian job site extracted a sample of 1,997 potential applicants (88% male; mean age = 33.5 years,  $SD = 8.7$ ; 78% higher educated; 38% >10 years of work

experience) from their database, who had indicated their interest in engineering jobs. About half (965) of the potential applicants were randomly assigned to the postcard condition, whereas the other 1,032 potential applicants were assigned to the e-mail condition. Statistical analyses revealed no significant differences between the two conditions in terms of demographic variables.

#### Applicant pool measures

We gathered indices of actual applicant behaviour that were computed from the databases of the job site and the recruiting organization. The number of applicants (i.e., the number of people who applied for the job by submitting their résumé) was used as an indicator of *applicant pool quantity* (Collins & Han, 2004). To test our hypothesis, we compared the ratio of the number of actual applicants relative to the number of potential applicants addressed in each condition.

In line with recommendations (Carlson, Connerley, & Mecham, 2002), multiple indices of *applicant pool quality* were selected (see Table 1). The first two measures, level of education and work experience, are widely accepted signals of applicant pool quality (Rynes & Barber, 1990). As a third indicator, recruiters' quality perceptions were taken into account; that is, the recruiter evaluated applicants' résumés and decided whether to invite them for a job interview.

Table 1. Comparison of applicant pool quality between the postcard and e-mail conditions

	Postcard (n = 105)		E-mail (n = 105)		$\alpha$	t	df	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD					
Strangeness <sup>a</sup>	5.92	0.93	5.60	0.98	.77	2.43	208	.02	0.34
Media richness <sup>b</sup>	4.84	1.03	4.87	0.94	.84	−0.23	208	.82	−0.03
Language variety	5.73	1.03	5.43	1.13	.77	2.01	208	.05	0.28
Multiplicity of cues	4.36	1.34	4.51	1.10	.70	−0.90	208	.37	−0.13
Personal focus	4.98	1.45	4.88	1.42	.68	0.48	208	.63	0.07
Two-way communication	4.26	1.39	4.65	1.21	.83	−2.17	208	.03	−0.30
Credibility <sup>c</sup>	4.90	1.29	4.98	1.18	.83	−0.49	208	.62	−0.07

Note: Categories were defined by the organization.

<sup>a</sup> For two applicants in the postcard condition, this information was missing.

<sup>b</sup> We measured the level of relevant engineering work experience.

<sup>c</sup> The recruiter was blind for the recruitment source and evaluated potential applicants' résumés to decide whether or not to invite them for a job interview.

## Follow-up questionnaire

A follow-up study examined whether potential applicants perceived the postcard as significantly stranger than the e-mail, but not differently in terms of media richness and credibility, ruling out potential alternative explanations (Cable & Yu, 2006). The 1,997 potential applicants from the field experiment were contacted by e-mail 2 weeks after receiving the postcard or e-mail. In total, 210 individuals (86% male; mean age = 35.5 years,  $SD = 8.7$ ; 85.6% higher educated; 50% >10 years of work experience) completed an anonymous follow-up questionnaire (response rate = 10.5%). Each condition contained 105 individuals, with no significant differences in terms of demographic variables.

The *strangeness* of the medium was measured with three items from the originality dimension of the Creativity Product Semantic Differential Scale (White & Smith, 2001) (see Table 2 for all items of the follow-up questionnaire). *Media richness* was assessed by Webster and Trevino's (1995) scale, consisting of four subscales: language variety, multiplicity of cues, personal focus, and two-way communication. To measure the *credibility* of the medium, three items were used from Van Hove and Lievens (2007).

Table 2. Results of the follow-up questionnaire on recruitment medium characteristics

	Postcard ( <i>n</i> = 105)		E-mail ( <i>n</i> = 105)		$\alpha$	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
Strangeness <sup>a</sup>	5.92	0.93	5.60	0.98	.77	2.43	208	.02	0.34
Media richness <sup>b</sup>	4.84	1.03	4.87	0.94	.84	−0.23	208	.82	−0.03
Language variety	5.73	1.03	5.43	1.13	.77	2.01	208	.05	0.28
Multiplicity of cues	4.36	1.34	4.51	1.10	.70	−0.90	208	.37	−0.13
Personal focus	4.98	1.45	4.88	1.42	.68	0.48	208	.63	0.07
Two-way communication	4.26	1.39	4.65	1.21	.83	−2.17	208	.03	−0.30
Credibility <sup>c</sup>	4.90	1.29	4.98	1.18	.83	−0.49	208	.62	−0.07

Note: Except for strangeness, the items were rated on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*).

<sup>a</sup> Three items were rated on a semantic differential rating scale. I found the (postcard, e-mail): overused (1) – novel (7); usual (1) – unusual (7); predictable (1) – surprising (7).

<sup>b</sup> Each subscale included two items. Language variety: the (postcard, e-mail) used rich and varied language; transmitted varied symbols. Multiplicity of cues: the (postcard, e-mail) carried symbolic meaning in addition to the actual words; told me a lot about the organization beyond what was said. Personal focus: the (postcard, e-mail) was targeted to me personally; communicated to me with a great deal of interpersonal warmth. Two-way communication: the (postcard, e-mail) provided the opportunity to communicate with the organization; provided the opportunity to receive feedback. The CFA of the higher-order model (four lower-order factors loading on one higher-order factor) showed a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(16) = 31.45$ ,  $p < .01$ , CFI = .977, RMSEA = .068, SRMR = .044,  $\chi^2/df = 1.97$ .

<sup>c</sup> The scale included three items: I found the (postcard, e-mail) accurate; believable; reliable.

## Results

Of the 1,997 potential applicants, 62 persons actually applied, with 51 (82%) coming from the postcard condition and 11 (18%) from the e-mail condition. Considering the ratio of actual versus potential applicants in each condition, 51 of 965 (5%) potential applicants receiving the postcard actually applied versus 11 of 1,032 (1%) potential applicants receiving the e-mail. In support of H1, the strange recruitment medium was associated with substantially higher applicant pool quantity than a more frequently used medium,  $\chi^2(1) = 29.51, p < .001, w = .12$ .

Next, we used the sample of actual applicants ( $n = 62$ ) to test for differences in applicants' quality characteristics (see Table 1). Applicants who applied after receiving the postcard were significantly more likely to be higher educated than applicants responding to the e-mail (84% vs. 55%). Regarding recruiter's quality ratings, 35% of the postcard applicants were invited for a job interview versus only 18% of the e-mail applicants. However, this difference did not reach statistical significance. Finally, we observed no significant difference between the two conditions in terms of work experience. So, there was partial support for H2.

As shown in Table 2, follow-up questionnaire analyses indicated that potential applicants perceived the postcard as significantly stranger than the e-mail. There were no differences in perceived overall media richness<sup>2</sup> and credibility.

## Discussion

This field experiment showed that using a strange recruitment medium generated considerably more applicants with a higher level of education than recruiting through a frequently used medium. In line with social cognition principles, recruiting in a strange way that differs from what competitors are doing is likely to be inconsistent with recruitment scripts, enhancing potential applicants' attention, attraction, and intention to apply.

In terms of practical implications, this study suggests that organizations may increase recruitment effectiveness by 'changing things up' and employing 'strange' recruitment media (Cable, 2007). Specifically, we found that in this particular study, an unusual medium such as a postcard generated about five times more actual applicants than using a common medium such as an e-mail. Note that low application rates are typical when recruiting engineers, so that the 5% response for the postcard was regarded as high by the recruiting organization. On the basis of the utility calculations of Carlson *et al.* (2002), our finding implies that when the organization hires, for instance, 10 of these applicants ( $N$ ) who remain in their job for 5 years ( $T$ ), the postcard is associated with a utility increase ( $\Delta U$ ) of 23,352 euros over the e-mail, with education level as an indicator of applicant quality ( $\Delta Z_x = .29$  and  $r_{xy} = .10$ ) and estimating the standard deviation of job performance ( $SD_y$ ) at 16,540 euros (40% of the average gross annual salary of engineers with 10 years of work experience in Belgium), and the additional cost of the

postcard ( $\Delta C$ , printing and stamps) at 730 euros. Therefore, we encourage organizations to further experiment with unusual recruitment media to differentiate themselves in the labour market (e.g., Google billboard3).

A limitation of this study is the small sample size of actual applicants resulting in lower power for the quality measures.<sup>4</sup> This is a result from our research design: It is inherent of a real-life recruitment context that at the end of the recruitment process, sample sizes become small. As another limitation, our study deals with only one organization, one vacancy, and two recruitment media. In line with our definition of a strange recruitment medium, it is likely that what constitutes a strange medium depends on what direct competitors on the labour market are doing and therefore differs across jobs, companies, and industries. Thus, rather than identifying a single ‘best media practice’, this field experiment puts forth ‘media strangeness’ as a more general evidence-based principle, which recruiters might take into account when selecting media for communicating job postings. Finally, to assess applicant pool quality, we were restricted to three indices provided by the organization. It would be interesting to investigate additional indicators of applicant quality in future research, such as person–organization fit.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our results are promising and warrant future research on the role of strange recruitment media and activities. For example, we encourage future research to investigate potential applicants' image perceptions as a possible mediator of the relationship between strange recruitment media and applicant pool characteristics. As organizational image perceptions are crucial factors explaining potential applicants' attraction to organizations (Lievens, Van Hove, & Schreurs, 2005), they might help to explain the positive effect of strange recruitment activities.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Derek S. Chapman, Christopher J. Collins, and Mark J. Schmit for their valuable comments and Herlinde Pieters and Mark Van der kinderen for the close cooperation during the data collection. This research was supported in part by a Postdoctoral Fellow grant from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) awarded to the second author.

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